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The ITT Affair: A True-to-Life Story

With the help of a lawyer and her doctor, Mrs. Dita Beard, the ITT lobbyist whose inter-office memorandum touched off the current ITT imbroglio, delivered on Friday an emotional attack on the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings into the matter ("an absurd circus") and categorically denied "the allegation that there was an arrangement between ITT and the administration involving a favorable settlement of the antitrust action." There are several things to be said about this, not the least of which is that they have a curious way of handling heart patients at the Rocky Mountain Osteopathic Hospital in Denver. Twice while Mrs. Beard was showing signs of improvement, they have apparently brought in the morning papers and she has had a relapse.

The second thing to wonder about is why the friends of Mrs. Beard—or of ITT or of the Justice Department—should take the trouble to produce yet another denial from somebody they have been systematically setting out to discredit as "irrational," "disturbed," given to drink "excessively," and a "poor soul" who doesn't know what she is doing. If she is all of these things, her celebrated memorandum may be valueless, or unreliable, but the same, of course, would have to be said of her denials; we cannot be expected to accept the latter while discounting the former. In the absence of more conclusive evidence one way or the other, our inclination is to accept both, not necessarily as reliable, but as worth examination on their merits, and never mind about Mrs. Beard's state of mental health. For that reason we are reproducing elsewhere on this page today an exact copy of the memorandum so you can judge for yourself its validity.

What you discover, on reading it, is first of all a true-to-life ring to its incidental aspects—the White House phone calls and the concern over secrecy; the exchange with "Louie" (former Kentucky Governor Louie B. Nunn); the cynical allusion to "our noble effort" (the $400,000 pledge) and the uncertainty about the terms of it; the fact of her encounter with Attorney General Mitchell at the Kentucky Derby, leaving aside for the moment whether her account is correct; the overblown claims of influence effectively brought to bear, which are the stock in trade of the successful lobbyist; even the injunction to destroy the memorandum. It has enough of the ring of reality, if not of truth—of the way it is in the Dismal Swamp of American politics—to make this a revealing document, up to a point, even if some of its implications are ultimately proven to be wrong.

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The second interesting aspect of it is that it nowhere specifically alleges what Mrs. Beard is now denying; it does not claim there was a "deal" or "compact" or even an "arrangement" in any formal sense; it merely suggests and hints and implies. So it doesn't necessarily matter whether what Brit Hume (Jack Anderson's assistant) said about what Dita told him about what the Attorney General allegedly told her about what President Nixon said is true. It doesn't even necessarily matter that Mr. Mitchell says he knew nothing about the convention arrangements (except for the fact that there is evidence to the contrary) or that the attorney general-designate, Mr. Richard Kleindienst insists the ITT case was "handled and negotiated exclusively" by the antitrust division (except that there is more serious and more damaging evidence to the contrary on this score). In terms of what is fundamentally important about the ITT affair, none of these denials matters a great deal, and the same may be said for much of the defense so far put up by ITT and the Justice Department and the White House against the questions of wrongdoing that have been raised.

The demands of "arrangements" do not necessarily matter because more often than not *that is not the way the system works;* that is not how relations between government and big business are usually carried out. What we need to remember as we follow the ITT affair with the resumption of the hearings today is that we are not talking here about isolated encounters between the government and a huge corporation from which "deals" would be likely to emerge. Rather these are ongoing relationships in which the Very Rich buy goodwill day in, day out, the year around and it cuts both ways. The promise of some measure of favoritism, sometimes specific, sometimes general, is used by government —or politicians in government—to extract favors, normally in the form of campaign contributions, from big business; and big business pays up, on a bi-partisan basis, in anticipation of a pleasant and profitable working relationship with government. Sometimes what is given is more closely linked by time and circumstances to what is received; othertimes, it is merely part of a continuing give and take, in which down payments are made with no more than a general anticipation of future delivery.

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That's why it isn't necessary in these matters—and often not possible—to have firm evidence of a specific quid for a particular quo in order to conclude that there is rank favoritism; that something is happening that shouldn't happen; and that there is something wrong in a system that can apparently accept with equanimity the spectacle of a $400,000 convention gift from ITT to the Republican Party at a time when ITT was involved in antitrust litigation with a Republican administration. You would need such firm evidence for prosecution of a crime, and for all we know it may come to that in the case of ITT. But you don't need that sort of evidence to perceive at least some impropriety in a case where there is clear evidence of a favor granted to a corporation which was sparing no effort to win favor. That much is evident from the settlement itself, from the way that doors swung open all over town for ITT executives to plead and work for an out-of-court agreement, and from the role of the White House—about which we do not yet know nearly enough.

So to say that there was no "arrangement" or "deal" or "payoff," as such, doesn't begin to get a the heart of the ITT affair because it doesn't begi to get at the nub of how it works in the Disma Swamp. The only way to do that is for the Senat Judiciary Committee to press on with its investig tion, not necessarily or exclusively in pursuit c wrongdoing in the conventional, legal sense, bu also for the sake of exposing the System to publ view so that people can see it—and see what the think about it—for themselves.